



Bran and Branwen

Background

Bran Fendigaid (the Blessed) and Branwen are the children of Llyr and his sister-wife, Penarddun. Manawyddan is their brother; Nisien and Efnisien (children of Penarddun and Eurosmynd), their half-brothers.

Llyr means 'Sea'; *Penarddun* means 'Most Beautiful'.

Bran means 'Raven'; *Branwen* means 'White Raven'.

Nisien means 'Peaceful'; *Efnisien* means 'Non-peaceful'.

Bran is known as the god of prophecy, arts, music, writing and war, patron of the Bards.

Branwen, the raven goddess, is Bran's feminine counterpart. Although essentially lost in the Celtic British (i.e. Cymric) tradition, the raven war goddess is well recorded in Irish mythology, her collective name being the Mórigán, and with goddesses such as Badb, Macha and Nemain being aspects of her. Triads of these goddesses represent the Fates. They were often the causes of battles and were offered the heads of the dead warriors as a form of appeasement. The Mórigán is intimately associated with water (e.g. Llyr, 'Sea'). She is described as having intercourse with the Dagda astride water, whilst the Badb aspect of her causes the waters to part so that an army may pass dry-shod.

Bran and Branwen are the chief god and goddess of the Isle of Avalon, a name for Britain. They appear in myth as semi-divine, semi-human, with Bran depicted as a giant whom no building can contain. In other words, in true mythological style, an archetypal wisdom is conveyed by means of associating it with a human story or amalgamation of stories, using the latter to illustrate and teach the underlying wisdom. As in most great myths, the myth is also associated with the landscape in which the story is enacted, thereby revealing the wisdom underlying nature.

The Bran and Branwen myth is related in the tale of *Branwen ferch Llŷr*, the Second Branch of the *Mabinogi* (Mabinogion).

The Myth

Matholwch, king of Ireland, sailed to Britain in thirteen ships, to request Branwen's hand in marriage. He brought with him an enormous number of horses as a gift to Bran, king of Britain. Being desirous of an alliance with other Celtic nations, Bran (and presumably Branwen), together with the British nobility, agreed to this proposal and a feast was held to celebrate the betrothal.

During the betrothal feast, Efnisien, a half-brother of Bran and Branwen, arrived unaware of what was taking place. He asked why there were celebrations and, on being told the reason, he was furious that he had not been consulted and that his half-sister had been given in marriage without his consent. In his rage he brutally mutilated Matholwch's horses, making them lame. This caused so much offence to the Irish king and his attendant nobles that Bran felt obliged to give Matholwch his own horses in recompense, plus a magical cauldron as a wedding gift that he had obtained from a giantess (the goddess Ceridwen). This wondrous cauldron had the power to bring the dead back to life, the only downside being that they would be reborn mute. By means of these peace offerings, Matholwch was appeased and the feast continued. The marriage followed soon after and Matholwch returned to Ireland with his new queen.

After a period of happiness, Branwen gave birth to a son, Gwern. Efnisien's insult, however, still rankled among the Irish, influencing Matholwch and leading to Branwen being mistreated and then banished to the kitchen to serve

as a slave, where she was beaten every day. During three years of such mistreatment she patiently trained a starling, until she could send the bird with a message to her brother, Bran, asking for help.

Bran was astonished to hear of the ill-treatment of his beloved sister. He had previously heard rumours of this happening but had not believed them. Now he was forced to act. He gathered a mighty army from all the provinces of Britain and, accompanied by his brother, Manawyddan, crossed the Irish Sea to rescue his sister. The army sailed in ships; Bran waded through the water. (The Irish Sea was then only two rivers, the Lli and Archan.)

When Matholwch heard of Bran's approach, he moved quickly to destroy all the bridges over the rivers in the hope of preventing Bran and the British army from reaching him. However, Bran stretched his body over each river, forming a bridge so that his men could cross over. Eventually realising that Bran and his mighty force was unstoppable, Matholwch sued for peace, agreeing to abdicate in favour of Gwern, his son by Branwen. Having had these proposals accepted by Bran, Matholwch built a house for Bran, large enough to entertain him and his men with a great feast, during which Matholwch would hand over sovereignty to Gwern.

Many of the Irish lords disapproved of the whole idea, so they hung a hundred bags on the pillars inside the house, supposedly containing flour but actually containing armed warriors, with orders to jump out and attack the Britons when they arrived for the feast. Efnisien, suspecting treachery, reconnoitred the hall beforehand. He discovered what was afoot and killed the would-be assassins in the sacks by crushing their skulls. Later, once the feast had begun, to everyone's horror Efnisien suddenly became enraged for no apparent reason and threw Gwern into the fire, killing him.

This led to the outbreak of a vicious war between the Irish and British, in which a vast number of warriors were killed. During the fight, seeing that the Irish were using the cauldron to revive their dead, and realising that his arrogance had brought on the possible destruction of his own family, Efnisien deliberately hid himself among the Irish corpses so that he would be thrown into the cauldron by the unwitting enemy. Once inside the cauldron, he destroyed it from within by bursting it asunder. This was an ultimate act of self-sacrifice, as he burst his own heart in the process.

In the end there was no winning side. All the Irish men were slain and only seven British men survived, among them Manawyddan, Taliesin and Pryderi son of Pwyll, prince of Dyfed. Bran had been mortally wounded in the foot by a poisoned spear, but survived long enough to ask his remaining companions to cut off his head when he had breathed his last and carry it to Caer-Lundein (London), where they were to bury it in the Gwynfryn (White Hill), facing the Continent, as a protective talisman against plagues and invasion. Bran also said that on the journey his head would talk, sing and prophesy to them and be as pleasant company as it was in life. When Bran died, and nearly all the men of Britain with him, the harvests back in Britain started to fail and the land became barren and unworkable.

Carrying the head of Bran, these seven surviving British warriors left Ireland together with Bran's sister, Branwen, leaving behind them five pregnant Irish women by whom the land could be repopulated. They landed at Talebolyn in Aber Alaw, the mouth of the Alaw river on Anglesey, where Branwen, on seeing the coasts of both Ireland and Britain, became so distraught over the death of her brother and the terrible havoc that had been reaped on both nations, for which she felt herself to be responsible, that she died from a broken heart.

Having interred Branwen's remains on Anglesey in a cairn called Bedd Branwen, Manawyddan and the other six men travelled on to Harlech where they stayed for seven years, entertained by Bran's head and the singing birds of Rhiannon, and where they knew nothing but joy and mirth. The head then instructed them to move on to Gwales ('shelter,' 'lair'), where there was a fabulous castle in which the companions lived for a further eighty years. There they were entertained by the head and feasted in blissful forgetfulness, completely unaware of the passing of time. The castle had a hall with three doors. Two doors were opened, but the third door, facing Cornwall, was kept closed, since Bran's head had told them that as long as this third door was kept closed they could remain in Gwales. Eventually, however, Heilyn son of Gwyn opened the third door and the memory of everything that had befallen them returned. The seven companions then set out for Caer-Lundein (London) with the head, following the Sarn Wydellin ('Irish Way,' or Watling Street), to inter it in the Gwynfryn ('White Hill') as instructed.

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Notes

Gwales, a Celtic Otherworld, has come to be identified with the tiny islet of Grassholm off the south-west coast of Wales, but it could just as easily be equated with Bardsey Island off the tip of the Llŷn Peninsular in north-west Wales. Bardsey is said to be the Crystal Island where Merlin is buried together with the Nine Orders of Bards and the Thirteen Grail Hallows.

However, either Snowdon or Dinas Bran could be the most likely earthly equivalent of Gwales. Snowdon is a 'crystal' mountain, and Dinas Bran is Bran's Castle set on a mountain that rises solitary like an island in the Dee valley. Bran is most definitely associated with Dinas Bran, whilst Lludd (Merlin) is the main god associated with Snowdon. From Harlech, the most natural and ancient way to travel to London would be via Snowdon and Dinas Bran.

The sequence of experience that the companions had, first at Harlech and then at Gwales, culminating with a decision to travel on to London with the head as their act of service, is a description of crown chakra bliss, followed by brow chakra meditation and learning, culminating with an understanding of what to do and when to do it, a decision to do it, and the act itself. Travelling down the Sarn Wydellin to London (the root chakra) and burying the head there is a description of grounding the idea in action, until it is completed (i.e. completely earthed or manifested, job finished). It is a natural sequence of thought into action, from the highest level of consciousness, and is also an allegorical description of the spiritual energy that falls from heaven to earth (i.e. crown to root) down the spine – the same as the 'lightning flash' down the 'Tree of Life'; and it is this that has the power to raise the kundalini from root to crown.

London. Besides Snowdon, Lludd is also associated with London, whose earlier Celtic name was Caer Lludd and whose main hill, Ludgate Hill, is named after Lludd.

Anglesey, which looks like a head from the air, is traditionally taken to be a representation of the head of Bran, cut off from the body of the mainland by the Menai Straits. Anglesey is also traditionally known as the home of Bran and his family; but this is clearly another level of interpretation of the myth.

Grail Kings. In the Grail tradition, the first Grail King was Bran Fendigaid ('Bran the Blessed'). His castle was Dinas Bran at Llangollen. He went on a long journey to recover a magical vessel of knowledge and plenty – a Celtic cauldron of rebirth. He married Anna (Enygeus), the daughter of Joseph of Arimathea. He was given the Holy Grail by Joseph, who was known as the first Grail Keeper. The Celtic cauldron of rebirth became associated with the Holy Grail (Sangreal) and, in terms of the Sang Real or royal bloodline, may have been the same thing (i.e. both Bran and Anna were each from ancient royal bloodlines, and Anna was the Holy Grail from the point of view of being the bearer of their child). Like the god Bran, Bran Fendigaid was wounded by a poisoned spear and the land perished until he was healed. The descendants of Bran Fendigaid and Anna were successive Grail Kings, including at a much later date the Tudor monarchs.

Much of the information available about Bran Fendigaid strongly suggests that at least part of his legend entered into later Arthurian romance. His magical cauldron is probably that sought by King Arthur in the Welsh poem, the "*Spoils of the Annwfn*". As in Bran Fendigaid's story, Arthur and his warriors travel to the Celtic Otherworld to obtain the pearl-rimmed Cauldron of Annwfn. It was eventually discovered at Caer Siddhi, a crystal castle on a crystal mountain (or island), where it was guarded by nine maidens. But the ensuing perils became too much for Arthur's men; the mission was abandoned and only seven men survived to return home.

The wound to Bran's foot, which caused his lands to fail, is echoed in the story of the Arthurian Grail guardian known as the Fisher King. The Fisher King, like Bran's head, could feast with his followers indefinitely. His forename was said to be Bron (or Brons) in the *Didot Perceval*: clearly a transformation of Bran. The Fisher King's castle was Corbenic or Castell Dinas Bran, both names deriving from the word Raven or Crow.